Australian Government
Defence

Woomera Prohibited Area Advisory Board



ANNUAL REPORT

2024-2025

To defend Australia and its national interests in order to advance Australia's security and prosperity

www.defence.gov.au

Acknowledgement of Country

We respectfully acknowledge the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara, Antakirinja Matu Yankunytjatjara, Arabana, Gawler Ranges, Kokatha and Maralinga Tjarutja peoples, the traditional custodians of the lands upon which Defence operates within the Woomera Prohibited Area.

We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

We also acknowledge the service of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and women who have contributed – and continue to contribute – to the defence of Australia and its national interests.

Image warning

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that this document may contain images or content referring to deceased persons. It may also contain words or descriptions that are culturally sensitive.

Images

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Contact Details

Woomera Prohibited Area Coordination Office
Department of Defence
R1-1-A Zone
PO Box 7901
Canberra BC ACT 2610

Phone: 1300 727 420
Email: wpaco@defence.gov.au
www.defence.gov.au/woomera

Cover image:
An Australian Army NASAMS High-Mobility Launcher fires a Sidewinder missile during a live-fire certification activity at Woomera Test Range, South Australia.

Chair's Report

The Woomera Prohibited Area (WPA) is a unique national asset, central to the lives and work of a diverse range of users. Defence and the mining sector share the WPA with pastoralists, Traditional Owner groups, the transport sector, and tourists. The WPA Advisory Board is charged with overseeing the coexistence of all users, balancing the diverse national security, economic and cultural interests.

Over the last year, the WPA has continued to operate as a nationally significant site for Defence and a variety of other stakeholders. Under the auspices of the Board, it has been a busy year for the WPA, with the progression of key reforms and a healthy amount of positive interaction and cooperation between Defence and WPA stakeholders.

In August 2024, the Deputy Prime Minister the Hon Richard Marles MP directed Ms Rebecca Skinner PSM to deliver an independent Review of the WPA Coexistence Framework to the Commonwealth Government. This process involved extensive consultation with the Commonwealth, South Australian Government, and business and cultural groups to make recommendations that balance national security, economic and cultural interests in the WPA. I, along with the Board, am extremely pleased to have been involved.

In February 2025, the South Australian Government published its Resource Prospectivity and Economic Assessment. This report provides an updated review of the WPA's future mineral and energy resource potential and economic assessment of developing future resources. Publication of the report completed phase 1 of implementation of recommendation 5 of the 2018 Review. The Board will now be able to better coordinate and consider economic opportunities, balanced alongside Defence requirements.

During 2024-2025, the Board has overseen engagement with the six Traditional Owner groups. This included sharing with the groups the finalised individual Traditional Owner versions of the WPA Heritage Management Plan and seeking feedback on options for enhanced engagement. We recognise that building trust ensures the WPA is managed and informed by respect, honouring cultural connections to country and enabling shared decision-making. From 2026, Defence will provide groups an annual update, and offer each group a meeting to engage on issues of importance to them.

Looking forward, the Board will oversee implementation of Review recommendations, ensure new systems and processes minimise the administrative burden on stakeholders, and continue to expand and deepen partnerships with all users of the WPA. On behalf of the Advisory Board, I extend sincere thanks to all stakeholders for your ongoing collaboration and valuable contributions to the continued success of coexistence in the WPA.

Amanda Vanstone AO
Chair
Woomera Prohibited Area Advisory Board
October 2025

WPA Coexistence Framework

The Woomera Prohibited Area (WPA) Coexistence Framework is comprised of the WPA Rule and WPA coexistence governance arrangements (Memorandum of Understanding between the Commonwealth of Australia and the South Australian Government and the WPA Advisory Board). The Framework balances priority Defence use for test and evaluation of military systems, with the diverse range of other activities – including pastoral activity, resource exploration and production, Aboriginal native title and cultural heritage, tourism and scientific research.

Prior to the *WPA Rule 2014* sunsetting on 1 October 2026, the Australian Government commissioned a review of the Rule and supporting coexistence arrangements. The 2025 Review of the WPA Coexistence Framework follows previous reviews undertaken by Defence to ensure balance is maintained between national security, economic opportunities and cultural stewardship.

The majority of recommendations from the 2018 Review have been implemented. The two outstanding items were considered as part of the 2025 Review process.

Table 1: Summary of the status of WPA 2018 Review Recommendations

Recommendation 1	**Completed**
Building on the success of current arrangements, contemporary coexistence in the WPA should focus as much on strong and productive relationships as on sound legal and policy frameworks.	Steering and working groups were established to oversee implementation and guide operational and strategic efforts. A strategic vision and communications plan was implemented to reflect the strategic landscape and keep stakeholders informed of WPA activities. Implemented modernised and tailored online interface for all WPA users.
Recommendation 2	**Completed**
Defence and the South Australian Government should employ a collaborative co-design process to determine the feasibility of a more flexible grid-based arrangement for the WPA green zone.	Through close engagement with the 2024 Review, and building on previous collaborative co-design with the South Australian Government, Defence has confirmed the feasibility of a flexible grid-based arrangement for the WPA green zone.
Recommendation 3	**Completed**
All users of the WPA should give greater emphasis to managing the introduction and use of technology in the area.	The WPA Advisory Board agreed to a Non-Defence Use of Technology Framework.

Recommendation 4	Completed
To manage the risks to national security associated with investment in the WPA, a key consideration for defence when it assesses WPA access applications should be whether companies have substantive Australian ownership, control, and influence.	Security obligations and foreign investment guidance for WPA access is published on the WPA website. Defence discusses safety and security obligations with WPA stakeholders in regular case management meetings. Defence conducts periodic audits and governance checks of company data, including foreign investment.
Recommendation 5	**In Progress**
Geological and economic analysis of the mineral, energy, and groundwater resources potential of the Gawler Craton Area, including the red zone within the WPA, should continue.	The finalised South Australian Department of Energy and Mining (DEM) Resource Prospectivity and Economic Assessment of the WPA was published on its website in early 2025. The 2025 Review considered the WPA's current and emerging economic potential, including of the red zone.
Recommendation 6	**Completed**
To address concerns about the feasibility of developing new mines in the WPA, Defence should reaffirm publicly its commitment to coexistence in the WPA.	WPA users were provided clear security obligation guidance and foreign investment guidelines on the WPA website to understand the unique requirements of operating in the WPA. Case management and engagement with stakeholders provides an understanding of industry needs for new mining activities in the WPA. The Advisory Board considered and agreed not to pursue third-party technical advisers for non-defence use of the WPA.
Recommendation 7	**Completed**
To strengthen the role of the WPA Advisory Board.	The WPA Advisory Board Terms of Reference was updated, a Memorandum of Understanding between the South Australian Government and Defence was signed, and an annual Health Check provides the Board with ongoing feedback on the Coexistence Framework effectiveness.
Recommendation 8	**Completed**
There should be a greater collective emphasis on the security of companies operating in the WPA.	The self-check and security obligation guidance has been published on the WPA website. Defence security risk assessment framework updated to reflect contemporary security requirements and robust risk guidance.
Recommendation 9	**Completed**
Defence and Aboriginal groups in the WPA should continue to build on their already strong relationships.	A WPA Heritage Management Plan was finalised. The Advisory Board Chair and Deputy Chair continue annual meetings with Aboriginal Corporations of the WPA and further developing the Air Force Regional Compliance Officer program.

Recommendation 10	Completed
Consideration should be given to new ways of managing small parcels of land no longer suitable for pastoral activity, and greater guidance provided to pastoralists for claiming compensation for losses due to defence testing.	Acquisitions will be considered based on Defence's strategic needs. Guidance for compensation claims is available on the WPA website.
Recommendation 11	**In Progress**
Administration of the WPA coexistence arrangements should be modernised.	Defence has identified a viable option to deliver a WPA digital application platform, subject to funding.
Recommendation 12	**Completed**
A further complete review of WPA arrangements by 2025.	Ms Rebecca Skinner PSM delivered her independent review to Government in March 2025.

WPA Advisory Board

Established in October 2012, the WPA Advisory Board (the Board) oversees governance of the WPA Coexistence Framework, providing a mechanism for government-to-government consultation on the balance of national interest in the WPA. The Board is led by an independent Chair and Deputy Chair, and supported by senior representatives from the Department of Defence, the Department of Industry, Science and Resource (DISR), South Australian DEM, and Defence SA.

The Board is guided by a terms of reference that outline key responsibilities, including:

- Monitoring and reporting on the alignment of national security and economic activity within the WPA;
- Overseeing the implementation and evolution of coexistence policy arrangements; and
- Fostering strategic relationships between Defence and non-defence users.

The Board meets twice a year, to receive updates from Commonwealth and South Australian government agencies, and to endorse proposed amendments to coexistence policies agreed to by both governments.

Current Membership

The Hon Amanda Vanstone AO, Chair

Ms Andrea Slattery, Deputy Chair

Air Marshal Stephen Chappell DSC, CSC, OAM, Chief of Air Force

Mr Hugh Jeffrey, Deputy Secretary Strategy, Policy and Industry Group, Australian Government Department of Defence

Mr Robert Jeremenko, Deputy Secretary Resources and Strategy Group, Australian Government Department of Industry, Science and Resources

Mr Paul Martyn PSM, Chief Executive, South Australian Government Department for Energy and Mining

Mr Matt Opie, Chief Executive, South Australian Government Defence SA

Year in Review July 2024-June 2025

Another year of sustained/increased use of the WPA for cultural, economic and national security activities evidenced the importance of the WPA to all stakeholders. This included a 32 percent increase in tourist permits, and 75 percent increase in opal mining permits, granted compared to the 2023-2024 period. In response to increased demands for Defence use of the WPA, Air Force implemented a number of practices to enable synchronised activities and minimise impact on other stakeholders.

In March 2025, Ms Rebecca Skinner submitted the final report of her independent Review of the WPA Coexistence Framework. This report and its recommendations reflected extensive consultation with a wide range of stakeholders representing the full diversity of interests in the WPA, including Ms Skinner's briefing at the Town Hall meeting in December 2024. The 2025 Review is the latest in a series of reviews undertaken to ensure the WPA's Coexistence Framework remains fit for purpose in Australia's evolving strategic environment.

The 2024 National Defence Strategy and Integrated Investment Program reset our capability priorities, enabling Defence to accelerate delivery of new, immediate and longer-term projects. This acceleration was supported by increased use of the WPA throughout the year. Defence activities included SCIFiRE, development of MQ-28 Ghost Bat, uncrewed aerial systems and advanced telemetric technologies. Ghost Bat achieved over 100 test flights within the WPA in March 2025. Successful completion of Exercise Carlsbad in June 2025 was the first time the MQ-28 conducted operations from a location outside of the WPA. This was a milestone achievement for the Australian designed and made autonomous aircraft.

Severe weather events in October - November 2024 caused widespread power outages across the Woomera Township and Test Range, and damage to base and town infrastructure. In a true show of resilience, creativity and town spirit, Defence and local residents adapted swiftly, undertaking rapid building repair, water conservation and pipeline restoration, and sharing resources. Air Force adjusted capability scheduling in line with coexistence arrangements to minimise the impact of these events on stakeholders and still maintain project delivery outcomes.

Defence SA, the Department of Defence and Southern Launch worked closely to manage contingency planning for the historic Varda Space Capsule landing on 28 February 2025. This occasion marked Australia's first-ever commercial spacecraft re-entry, representing a milestone achievement and an example of successful coordination between State, Commonwealth and private industry.

SA DEM concluded drilling for the Northern Gawler National Drilling Initiative in March 2025. Commencing in October 2024, seven drill holes were completed, including five which intersected basement rocks. This expansion of knowledge into the geological history of the area will support future investment and understanding of the region's potential for mineral, energy and groundwater resources.

Following the approach to market for contractors in September 2024, DISR oversaw continued project planning for site maintenance works to clean-up general waste, including scrap metal, at Emu Field. Remediation works are expected to commence in mid-2026.